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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 000155

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL/IRF, and H

H PLEASE PASS TO OFFICE OF SENATOR BROWNBAC

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM KIRF](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ETRD](#) [EAGR](#) [VM](#) [HUMANR](#) [RELFREE](#)

SUBJECT: CODEL BROWNBAC: FOCUS ON RELIGION

REF: Hanoi 059

1. (U) Summary: In a series of official meetings in Hanoi on January 8, Senator Samuel Brownback expressed concerns about continuing, and perhaps increasingly severe, measures to restrict religious freedom in Vietnam. He urged the Government of Vietnam to act quickly to end these restrictions, saying that until the issue is resolved, Congress will continue to find ways to express its disapproval of the situation for religious practitioners in Vietnam. Brownback also urged the GVN to lift its suspension of US beef imports as soon as possible. GVN officials claimed that religious freedom exists in Vietnam, and that misperceptions abroad are caused by incorrect information. The GVN somewhat surprisingly granted Senator Brownback's request to visit Father Nguyen Van Ly, an imprisoned Catholic priest (reftel). End Summary

Message on Religious Freedom

2. (U) In his various meetings with the GVN, Senator Brownback explained that his major purpose in coming to Vietnam was to study religious freedom in the country. He said there is a growing perception in Congress that, while the situation for religious believers had been improving, after the signing of the U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement in December 2001 there has been a crackdown on religious freedom. Senator Brownback emphasized that this is an important issue in Congress, and if the Vietnamese do not address it, then Congress will find ways to make its displeasure known. The Senator assured GVN officials that "this does not have to be an impediment to our relations" and advised GVN officials that "you will determine how fast our relations grow" by how quickly this issue is dealt with successfully. Senator Brownback noted that he planned to hold Congressional hearings on religious freedom in Vietnam in the near future.

MFA

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3. (U) Vice Foreign Minister Le Cong Phung noted the positive trend of U.S. - Vietnam relations, but also expressed concern about a number of issues including trade disputes about catfish and shrimp, and moves in Congress to link non-humanitarian aid to progress on human rights issues, condemn Vietnam's treatment of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, and urge that Vietnam be named a Country of Particular Concern for violations of religious freedom. He further emphasized that Vietnam is always willing to engage the United States in dialogues. VFM Phung stated that Brownback had received misleading or incorrect information from sources in America. Brownback pointed out that allegations of mistreatment came from a number of sources, lending weight to the claims. Senator Brownback presented VFM Phung with a list of prisoners of concern, and the VFM promised to provide information about the cases.

MPS

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4. (U) Vice Minister of Public Security Le Van Huong separately cited improving relations between the U.S. and Vietnam, and said the MPS particularly welcomes continued exchanges of information with the USG on a number of security and law enforcement issues. Speaking about religious freedom, however, he also said that much of the information the USG has received is incorrect. Huong specifically mentioned Vo Van Ai of the International Buddhist Information Bureau, Kok Ksor of the Montagnard Foundation, and Ngo Thi Hien of the Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam as sources of distorted or false information. These individuals oppose the GVN, Huong alleged, and were manipulating the issue of religious freedom as a way to attack it. He said that, in truth, the GVN upholds a policy of freedom of religion, and that this was reflected in the rapid growth of Protestant groups in recent years. Addressing specific cases, Huong said that Vo Van Ai had "instigated" the problems of Thich Huyen Quang

and Thich Quang Do of the UBCV. Ai had sent the two a recording of a ceremony held in a Buddhist monastery in Australia in which participants criticized the GVN and flew the old South Vietnamese flag. In addition, Huong said the two monks had also sent documents to Ai to be used in this ceremony. Talking about imprisoned Father Nguyen Van Ly, Huong said that Ly was convicted for having incited villagers against civil authorities, and that this had nothing to do with his religious beliefs. In response to requests from Senator Brownback, Huong agreed to arrange a visit to Father Ly for later that afternoon (reftel).

Amcham  
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15. (U) At a lunch with the American Chamber of Commerce, Senator Brownback made brief comments about the importance of religious freedom issues in Congress and the perception among many that there had been a worsening of human rights and religious freedoms in Vietnam after the entry-into-force of the BTA. Several luncheon attendees described improvements in religious freedom in Vietnam or commented that allegations made outside Vietnam of severe repression in the country were exaggerated. One NGO representative pointed out that a large number of U.S. faith-based charities are now conducting humanitarian or development projects in Vietnam, and all of these groups believed that measures debated in Congress linking non-humanitarian aid to improvements in the human rights or religious freedom situation were counterproductive.

Top leaders  
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16. (U) In a meeting, Communist Party of Vietnam Secretariat member and Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan emphasized the current growth of number of churches and religious adherents as proof that the Government was not oppressing religion in Vietnam. He said that some violators of Vietnam's civil laws were falsely claiming religious oppression, however, and that this was perhaps misleading USG observers. Senator Brownback emphasized the number of different sources from which he had received allegations of abuse, and said that this lent credence to the charges. Separately, CPV Politburo member and National Assembly Chairman Nguyen Van An described himself as a Buddhist and his wife Catholic, which he said is a sign people were free to believe in Vietnam. An quoted the US Constitution, said that the equality of men enshrined in that document could be equated with the equality of nations, and urged the United States to pay "due respect to the ideas of different peoples." An pointed to Vietnam's history and claimed that the French had used religion to oppress the people and that religion had been a tool of dissent during Vietnam's past insurrections. During those times, said An, "churches had become battlefields, and priests soldiers."

17. (U) In both meetings, Senator Brownback also addressed the current Vietnamese restrictions on the import of US beef due to BSE. He urged the GVN to pay attention to the strong measures the U.S. was taking to guarantee the safety of its beef, and urged the GVN to lift the restrictions as soon as possible. Khoan acknowledged USG efforts, and said that the GVN was acting for health reasons only.

18. (U) Senator Brownback did not have an opportunity to review this cable before departure.  
BURGHARDT